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Benjamin P. Abbott

Marco Cavaglia

Missouri University of Science and Technology, cavagliam@mst.edu

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Upper Limits on the Stochastic Gravitational-Wave Background from Advanced LIGO's First Observing Run

B. P. Abbott *et al.**

(LIGO Scientific Collaboration and Virgo Collaboration)

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A wide variety of astrophysical and cosmological sources are expected to contribute to a stochastic gravitational-wave background. Following the observations of GW150914 and GW151226, the rate and mass of coalescing binary black holes appear to be greater than many previous expectations. As a result, the stochastic background from unresolved compact binary coalescences is expected to be particularly loud. We perform a search for the isotropic stochastic gravitational-wave background using data from Advanced Laser Interferometer Gravitational Wave Observatory's (aLIGO) first observing run. The data display no evidence of a stochastic gravitational-wave signal. We constrain the dimensionless energy density of gravitational waves to be $\Omega_0 < 1.7 \times 10^{-7}$ with 95% confidence, assuming a flat energy density spectrum in the most sensitive part of the LIGO band (20–86 Hz). This is a factor of ~ 33 times more sensitive than previous measurements. We also constrain arbitrary power-law spectra. Finally, we investigate the implications of this search for the background of binary black holes using an astrophysical model for the background.

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Introduction.—Many astrophysical and cosmological phenomena are expected to contribute to a stochastic gravitational-wave (GW) background, henceforth, simply referred to as a “background.” These include unresolved compact binary coalescences of both black holes and neutron stars [1–5], rotating neutron stars [6–8], supernovae [9–12], cosmic strings [13–16], inflationary models [17–24], phase transitions [25–27], and the pre-big-bang scenario [28–31]. The variety of mechanisms potentially contributing to the background provides the opportunity to study a number of different environments within the Universe.

The recent detections of binary black hole (BBH) coalescences by the Advanced Laser Interferometer Gravitational Wave Observatory (aLIGO) [32,33] suggest that the Universe may be rich with coalescing BBHs. While events like GW150914 and GW151226 are loud enough to be clearly detected, we expect there to be many more events that are too far away to be individually resolved and that contribute to the background. Since this BBH population originates from sources that are too distant to be individually detected, the stochastic search probes a distinct population of binaries compared to nearby sources [34]. The background from these binaries provides complementary information to individually resolved binary coalescences [35].

In this Letter, we report on the search for an isotropic background using data from Advanced LIGO's first observing run O1. We search for the background by cross-correlating data streams from the two separate LIGO detectors and looking for a coherent signal. We find

no evidence for the background and place the best upper limits to date on the energy density of the background in the LIGO frequency band. We also update the implications for a BBH background using all the data from O1.

Data.—Before this analysis, the best limits on the background from Initial LIGO and Virgo data were obtained using 2009–2010 [36] and 2005–2007 data [37]. In this Letter, we use data from the upgraded Advanced LIGO observatories in Hanford, Washington (H1) and Livingston, Louisiana (L1) [38]. We analyze O1 data from September 18, 2015 15:00 UTC–January 12, 2016 16:00 UTC.

Method.—We define the background energy density spectrum as [39]

$$\Omega_{\text{GW}}(f) = \frac{f}{\rho_c} \frac{d\rho_{\text{GW}}}{df}, \quad (1)$$

where f is the frequency, $\rho_c = 3c^2 H_0^2 / (8\pi G)$ is the critical energy density to close the Universe (numerically, $\rho_c = 7.8 \times 10^{-9} \text{ erg/cm}^3$ using the Hubble constant $H_0 = 68 \text{ km s}^{-1} \text{ Mpc}^{-1}$ from [40,41]), and $d\rho_{\text{GW}}$ is the gravitational-wave energy density in the frequency range from f to $f + df$. For the LIGO frequency band, most theoretical models for $\Omega_{\text{GW}}(f)$ can be approximated as a power law in frequency [39,42,43]

$$\Omega_{\text{GW}}(f) = \Omega_\alpha \left(\frac{f}{f_{\text{ref}}} \right)^\alpha. \quad (2)$$

Following [35], we assume a reference frequency of 25 Hz, which corresponds to the most sensitive band of the LIGO

*Full author list given at the end of the article.

stochastic search for a detector network operating at design sensitivity. The variable Ω_α characterizes the background amplitude across the sensitive frequency band. Past analyses have used $\alpha = 0$ and $\alpha = 3$ to represent cosmologically and astrophysically motivated background models, respectively [36,42–45]. In this analysis, we use these two spectral indices but, also, include limits on the background spectrum assuming $\alpha = 2/3$, which describes the background dominated by compact binary inspirals [35,46]. This choice of spectral index is especially interesting given the loud background from BBHs inferred from recent Advanced LIGO detections in O1 [32,33,35,47].

Our search uses a cross-correlation method optimized to search for the background using the pair of LIGO detectors [39]. As discussed, for instance, in [48], cross-correlation is preferred to autocorrelation methods because the noise variances in each detector are not known sufficiently well to perform subtraction of the noise autopower. We define the estimator

$$\hat{Y}_\alpha = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} df \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} df' \delta_T(f - f') \tilde{s}_1^*(f) \tilde{s}_2(f') \tilde{Q}_\alpha(f'), \quad (3)$$

with variance

$$\sigma_Y^2 \approx \frac{T}{2} \int_0^\infty df P_1(f) P_2(f) |\tilde{Q}_\alpha(f)|^2, \quad (4)$$

where $\tilde{s}_{1,2}(f)$ are the Fourier transforms of the strain time series data from the two detectors, $\delta_T(f - f')$ is a finite-time approximation to the Dirac delta function, T is the observation time, $P_{1,2}$ are the one-sided power spectral densities for the detectors, and $\tilde{Q}_\alpha(f)$ is a filter function to optimize the search [49]

$$\tilde{Q}_\alpha(f) = \lambda_\alpha \frac{\gamma(f) H_0^2}{f^3 P_1(f) P_2(f)} \left(\frac{f}{f_{\text{ref}}} \right)^\alpha. \quad (5)$$

The spatial separation and relative orientation of the two detectors are accounted for in the overlap reduction function, $\gamma(f)$ [50], and the normalization constant λ_α is chosen such that $\langle \hat{Y}_\alpha \rangle = \Omega_\alpha$.

Data Quality.—For this analysis, the strain time series data are down-sampled to 4096 Hz from 16 384 Hz and separated into 50%-overlapping 192 s segments, as in [42]. The segments are Hann-windowed and high-pass filtered with a 16th order Butterworth digital filter with knee frequency of 11 Hz. The data are coarse grained to a frequency resolution of 0.031 Hz. This is a finer frequency resolution than was used in previous analyses due to the need to remove many finely spaced lines at low frequencies.

We apply cuts in the time and frequency domains, following [36]. The total live time after all time domain vetoes have been applied was 29.85 days. These cuts

remove 35% of the time-series data. The frequency domain cuts remove 21% of the observing band. In the Supplemental Material [51], we discuss, in more detail, the removed times and frequencies, the recovery of hardware and software injections, and an analysis of correlated noise due to geophysical Schumann resonances.

Results.—Our search finds no evidence of the background, and the data are consistent with statistical fluctuations, assuming Gaussian noise. The integrand of Eq. (3), multiplied by $df = 0.031$ Hz, gives an estimator for Ω_0 in each frequency bin. We plot this quantity, along with $\pm 2\sigma$ error bars, in Fig. 1. To check for Gaussianity, we employ a noise model that the estimator in each frequency bin is drawn from a Gaussian distribution with zero mean with the standard deviation of that frequency bin. We obtain a χ^2 per degree of freedom of 0.92, indicating that the data are consistent with Gaussian noise.

Consequently, we are able to place upper bounds on the energy density present in the background. For $\alpha = 0$, we place the bound $\Omega_0 < 1.7 \times 10^{-7}$ at 95% confidence, where 99% of the sensitivity comes in the frequency band 20–86 Hz. This is a factor of 33 times more sensitive than the previous best limit at these frequencies [36].

Following [56], we show 95% confidence contours in the Ω_α - α plane in Fig. 2 by computing the joint posterior for Ω_α and α . In addition, in Table I, we report upper limits on the energy density for specific fixed values of the spectral index, marginalizing over amplitude calibration uncertainty [57] using the conservative estimates of 11.8% for H1 and 13.4% for L1. Phase calibration uncertainties are negligible.

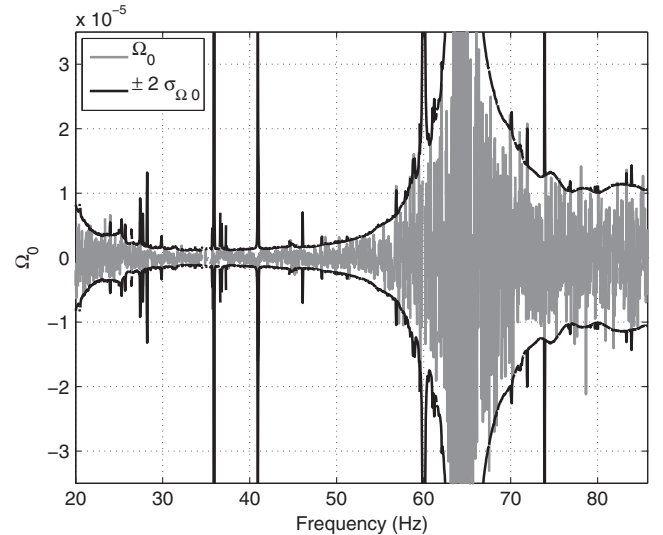


FIG. 1. We show the estimator for Ω_0 in each frequency bin, along with $\pm 2\sigma$ error bars, in the frequency band that contains 99% of the sensitivity for $\alpha = 0$. The loss of sensitivity at around 65 Hz is due to a zero in the overlap reduction function. There are several lines associated with known instrumental artifacts which do not lead to excess cross-correlation. The data are consistent with Gaussian noise, as described in the Results section.

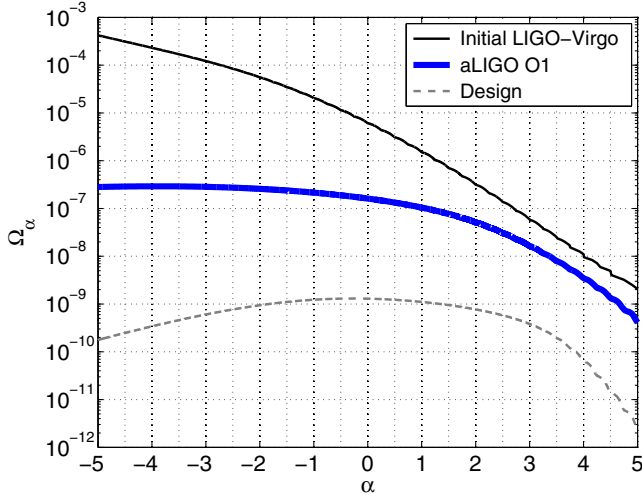


FIG. 2. Following [56], we present 95% confidence contours in the $\Omega_\alpha - \alpha$ plane. The region above these curves is excluded at 95% confidence. We show the constraints coming from the final science run of Initial LIGO-Virgo [36] and from O1 data. Finally, we display the projected (not observed) design sensitivity to Ω_α and α for Advanced LIGO and Virgo [58].

We also compare our results with the limits placed at high frequencies from the two colocated detectors at the Hanford site (H1 and H2). In [37], the limit $\Omega_3 < 7.7 \times 10^{-4}$ in the frequency band 460–1000 Hz was obtained for the spectral index $\alpha = 3$ and $f_{\text{ref}} = 900$ Hz. Using this same frequency band, and using the cross-correlated data between the Hanford and Livingston detectors, we place a limit $\Omega_3 < 1.7 \times 10^{-2}$ for $f_{\text{ref}} = 900$ Hz. This is about a factor of 22 larger than the limit from the colocated detectors, in part due to the loss in sensitivity of a stochastic search from cross-correlating detectors at different spatial locations.

In Fig. 3, we show the constraints from this analysis and from previous analyses using other detectors, theoretical predictions, and the expected sensitivity of future measurements by LIGO-Virgo and by the Laser Interferometer Space Antenna (LISA). Where applicable, we show constraints using power-law integrated curves (PI curves) [59], which account for the broadband nature of the search by integrating a range of power-law signals over the sensitive frequency band of the detector. By construction, any

power-law spectrum which crosses a PI curve is detectable with $\text{SNR} \geq 2$.

The blue curve labeled “aLIGO O1” in Fig. 3 shows the measured O1 PI curve. We also display the PI curve for the final science run of Initial LIGO and Virgo [36], H1–H2 [37], as well as the projected design sensitivity for the advanced detector network. The curve labeled “Design” assumes two years of coincident data taken with both Advanced LIGO and Virgo operating at design sensitivity, using the projections in [58]. For the sake of comparison, the measured O1 PI curve at $\alpha = 0$ is 1.6 times larger than the projected PI curve at $\alpha = 0$ using the projections in [58] and 29.85 days of live time, which is fairly good agreement between predicted and achieved sensitivity. Finally, in red, we present the projected sensitivity of a space-based detector with similar sensitivity to LISA, using the PI curve presented in [59] computed using the projections in [64,65].

We compare these constraints with direct limits from the ringing of Earth’s normal modes [63], indirect limits from the cosmic microwave background (CMB) and big bang nucleosynthesis [61], and limits from pulsar timing arrays [62] and CMB measurements at low multipole moments [60].

In addition, we give examples of several models which can contribute to the background. We show the background expected from slow-roll inflation with a tensor-to-scalar-ratio $r = 0.11$ (the upper limit allowed by Planck [40]). We also show examples of the BBH coalescence model, and the binary neutron star (BNS) coalescence model, which we describe below. As noted in [66], LISA is likely to be able to detect the BBH background of the size considered here.

Astrophysical Implications.—In order to model the background from binary systems, we will follow the approach of [35]. We divide the compact binary population into classes labeled by k [67,68]. Each class has distinct values of source parameters (for example, the masses), which we denote by θ_k . The total astrophysical background is a sum over the contributions in each class. The contribution of class k to the background may be written in terms of an integral over the redshift z as [1,5,69–74]

$$\Omega_{\text{GW}}(f; \theta_k) = \frac{f}{\rho_c H_0} \int_0^{z_{\text{max}}} dz \frac{R_m(z; \theta_k) \frac{dE_{\text{GW}}}{df}(f_s; \theta_k)}{(1+z)E(\Omega_M, \Omega_\Lambda, z)}, \quad (6)$$

TABLE I. The frequency bands with 99% of the sensitivity are shown, along with the point estimate and standard deviation for the amplitude of the background, and 95% confidence level upper limits using O1 data for three values of the spectral index, $\alpha = 0, 2/3, 3$. We also show the previous upper limits using Initial LIGO-Virgo data.

Spectral index α	Frequency band with 99% sensitivity	Amplitude Ω_α	95% C.L. upper limit	Previous limits [36]
0	20–85.8 Hz	$(4.4 \pm 5.9) \times 10^{-8}$	1.7×10^{-7}	5.6×10^{-6}
2/3	20–98.2 Hz	$(3.5 \pm 4.4) \times 10^{-8}$	1.3×10^{-7}	—
3	20–305 Hz	$(3.7 \pm 6.5) \times 10^{-9}$	1.7×10^{-8}	7.6×10^{-8}

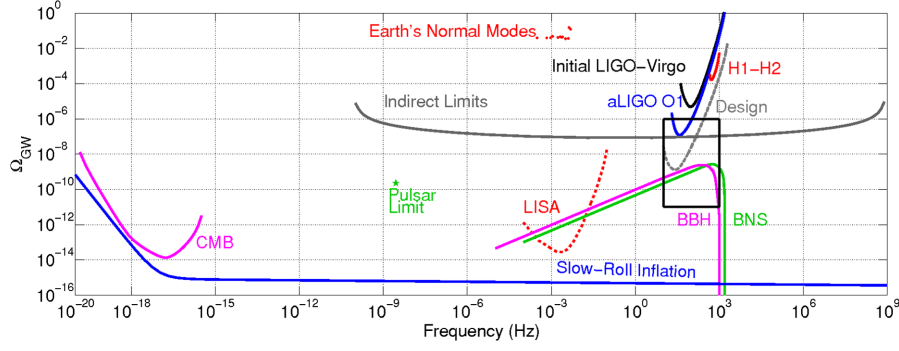


FIG. 3. Presented, here, are constraints on the background in PI form [59], as well as some representative models, across many decades in frequency. We compare the limits from ground-based interferometers from the final science run of Initial LIGO-Virgo, the colocated detectors at Hanford (H1–H2), Advanced LIGO (aLIGO) O1, and the projected design sensitivity of the advanced detector network assuming two years of coincident data, with constraints from other measurements: CMB measurements at low multipole moments [60], indirect limits from the cosmic microwave background (CMB) and big bang nucleosynthesis [61,62], pulsar timing [62], and from the ringing of Earth’s normal modes [63]. We also show projected limits from a space-based detector such as LISA [59,64,65], following the assumptions of [59]. We extend the BNS and BBH distributions using an $f^{2/3}$ power-law down to low frequencies, with a low-frequency cutoff imposed where the inspiral time scale is of the order of the Hubble scale. In Fig. 5, we show the region in the black box in more detail.

where $R_m(z; \theta_k)$ is the binary merger rate per unit comoving volume per unit time, $dE_{\text{GW}}/df(f_s, \theta_k)$ is the energy spectrum emitted by a single binary evaluated in terms of the source frequency $f_s = (1+z)f$, and $E(\Omega_M, \Omega_\Lambda, z) = \sqrt{\Omega_M(1+z)^3 + \Omega_\Lambda}$ accounts for the dependence of comoving volume on cosmology. We use cosmological parameters from Planck [40], and $\Omega_M = 1 - \Omega_\Lambda = 0.308$.

The energy spectrum dE_{GW}/df is determined from the strain waveform of the binary system. The dominant contribution to the background comes from the inspiral phase, however for BBH, we include the merger and ringdown phases using the waveforms from [5,75] with the modifications from [76]. We choose to cut off the redshift integral at $z_{\text{max}} = 10$. Redshifts larger than five contribute little to the integral due to the small number of stars formed at such high redshift [1,5,34,69–74].

To compute the binary merger rate $R_m(z; \theta_k)$, we use the same assumptions as in [35], unless stated otherwise. For the BNS case, we assume that the minimal time between the formation and the coalescence of the binary is $t_{\text{min}} = 20$ Myr, following, for instance, [46]. This is to be compared to $t_{\text{min}} = 50$ Myr for BBH [35,77].

As was emphasized in [78], heavy stellar mass black holes are expected to form in regions of low metallicity, which are associated with weaker stellar winds. To account for this effect, following [35], for binary systems with chirp masses larger than $30 M_\odot$, we use only the fraction of stars that form in an environment with metallicity $Z < Z_\odot/2$. For BBH (and BNS) systems with smaller masses, we do not use a cutoff. However, we note that it makes little difference whether or not the cutoff is applied to high masses.

With the model defined above, the free parameters are the local merger rate $R_{\text{local}} = R_m(0; \theta_k)$ and the average

chirp mass M_c . The distribution of the chirp mass has little effect on the spectrum for a fixed average chirp mass [5].

We place upper limits at 95% confidence in the M_c – R_{local} plane, which are shown in Fig. 4. Alongside the O1 results, we show the limits using Initial LIGO-Virgo data, as well as

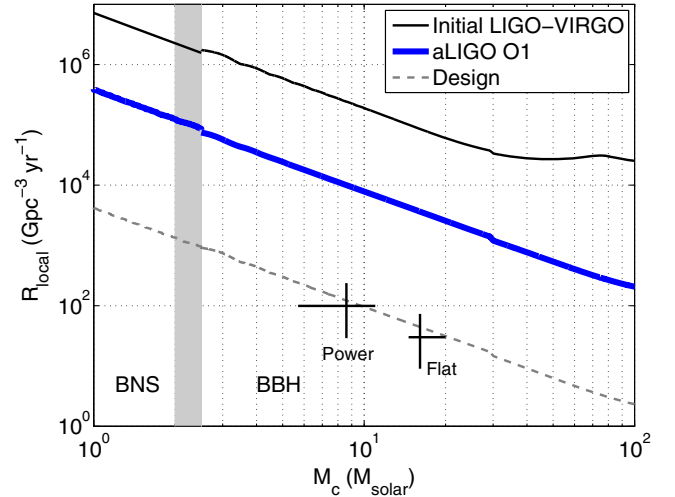


FIG. 4. Displayed, here, are the 95% confidence contours on the local rate and average chirp mass parameters, using the model described in the astrophysical implications section. In addition to the constraint from aLIGO O1 data, we show the constraint from the final science run of Initial LIGO-Virgo, and the projected design sensitivity of Advanced LIGO-Virgo. We also show the median rate with 90% uncertainty inferred from O1 data for the power-law and flat-log mass distributions [47], along with the band containing 68% of the chirp mass for each distribution. The gray band separates BNS from BBH backgrounds. The dip at $30 M_\odot$ is due to the metallicity cutoff, as described in the astrophysical implications section.

projected sensitivity of the advanced detector network. The limits presented here are about 10 times more sensitive than those placed with Initial LIGO-Virgo data. Furthermore, the future runs of the advanced detectors are expected to yield another factor of 100 improvement in sensitivity in R_{local} for a given average chirp mass. We also show the local rate and chirp mass inferred from direct detections of BBH mergers during O1 [47,68]. Comparing the projected design sensitivity on R_{local} and M_c , with the values inferred from BBH observations in O1, suggests that it may be possible for the advanced detector network to detect the astrophysical BBH background.

Finally, instead of treating the chirp mass and local merger rate as free parameters, we can use the information from individually observed BBHs to compute the corresponding background, see Fig. 5. To do this, we use the same model described above, and we adopt the three rate models described in [47]. Specifically, we consider the three-events-based, power-law, and flat-log distributions of component masses. In each case, the rate at redshift $z = 0$ is normalized to the local rate derived from the O1 detections. With these assumptions, we compute the background, including statistical uncertainty bands showing the 90% uncertainty in the local rate. The three rate models agree well in the sensitive frequency band of advanced detectors (10–100 Hz). Note, also, that the final sensitivity of the advanced detectors may be sufficient to detect this background.

Conclusions.—The search for the isotropic stochastic gravitational-wave background presented in this Letter, alongside the results described in Ref. [79] on the anisotropic background, represent the first search for the stochastic gravitational-wave background made with the Advanced LIGO detectors. With no evidence of a

stochastic signal, we place an upper limit of $\Omega_0 < 1.7 \times 10^{-7}$ on the GW energy density, for a spectral index $\alpha = 0$. This is ~ 33 times more sensitive than previous direct measurements in this frequency band. We also constrain the binary coalescence parameters of chirp mass and local merger rate. For fixed chirp mass below the high mass threshold of $30 M_\odot$, the constraint on the merger rate is improved by a factor of ~ 24 , while for fixed merger rate, the constraint on the chirp mass is improved by a factor of ~ 7 , as can be seen from Fig. 4. Finally, we update the background predictions due to BBH coalescences using data from O1. In this Letter, we have focused the implications of our results for an astrophysical BBH background, as this provides the most promising candidate for first detecting the background. The implications of our search for other astrophysical and cosmological models can be seen in Fig. 3. There is also an upcoming publication that will study implications for cosmic string models in more detail.

These O1 results are a glimpse of the improvements in sensitivity to be seen in upcoming years. As the advanced detectors reach design sensitivity, there is a reasonable possibility of detecting the background due to BBHs. Even if no detection is made with these future searches, the searches will be able to constrain important cosmological and astrophysical background models.

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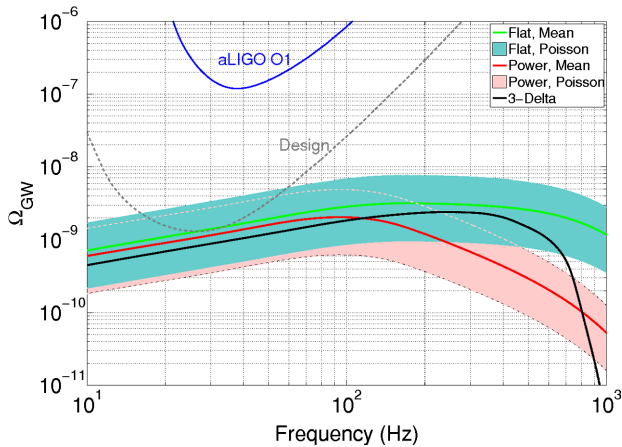


FIG. 5. We present a range of potential spectra for a BBH background, using the flat-log, power-law, and three-delta mass distribution models described in [47,78], with the local rate inferred from the O1 detections [47]. For the flat-log and power-law distributions, we show the 90% Poisson uncertainty band due to the uncertainty in the local rate measurement. In addition, we show the measured O1 PI curve and the projected PI curve for Advanced LIGO-Virgo operating at design sensitivity.

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B. P. Abbott,¹ R. Abbott,¹ T. D. Abbott,² M. R. Abernathy,³ F. Acernese,^{4,5} K. Ackley,⁶ C. Adams,⁷ T. Adams,⁸ P. Addesso,⁹ R. X. Adhikari,¹ V. B. Adya,¹⁰ C. Affeldt,¹⁰ M. Agathos,¹¹ K. Agatsuma,¹¹ N. Aggarwal,¹² O. D. Aguiar,¹³ L. Aiello,^{14,15} A. Ain,¹⁶ P. Ajith,¹⁷ B. Allen,^{10,18,19} A. Allocca,^{20,21} P. A. Altin,²² A. Ananyeva,¹ S. B. Anderson,¹ W. G. Anderson,¹⁸ S. Appert,¹ K. Arai,¹ M. C. Araya,¹ J. S. Areeda,²³ N. Arnaud,²⁴ K. G. Arun,²⁵ S. Ascenzi,^{26,15} G. Ashton,¹⁰ M. Ast,²⁷ S. M. Aston,⁷ P. Astone,²⁸ P. Aufmuth,¹⁹ C. Aulbert,¹⁰ A. Avila-Alvarez,²³ S. Babak,²⁹ P. Bacon,³⁰ M. K. M. Bader,¹¹ P. T. Baker,³¹ F. Baldaccini,^{32,33} G. Ballardin,³⁴ S. W. Ballmer,³⁵ J. C. Barayoga,¹ S. E. Barclay,³⁶ B. C. Barish,¹ D. Barker,³⁷ F. Barone,^{4,5} B. Barr,³⁶ L. Barsotti,¹² M. Barsuglia,³⁰ D. Barta,³⁸ J. Bartlett,³⁷ I. Bartos,³⁹ R. Bassiri,⁴⁰ A. Basti,^{20,21} J. C. Batch,³⁷ C. Baune,¹⁰ V. Bavigadda,³⁴ M. Bazzan,^{41,42} C. Beer,¹⁰ M. Bejger,⁴³ I. Belahcene,²⁴ M. Belgin,⁴⁴ A. S. Bell,³⁶ B. K. Berger,¹ G. Bergmann,¹⁰ C. P. L. Berry,⁴⁵ D. Bersanetti,^{46,47} A. Bertolini,¹¹ J. Betzwieser,⁷ S. Bhagwat,³⁵ R. Bhandare,⁴⁸ I. A. Bilenko,⁴⁹ G. Billingsley,¹ C. R. Billman,⁶ J. Birch,⁷ R. Birney,⁵⁰ O. Birnholtz,¹⁰ S. Biscans,^{12,1} A. S. Biscoveanu,⁷⁴ A. Bisht,¹⁹ M. Bitossi,³⁴ C. Biwer,³⁵ M. A. Bizouard,²⁴ J. K. Blackburn,¹ J. Blackman,⁵¹ C. D. Blair,⁵² D. G. Blair,⁵² R. M. Blair,³⁷ S. Bloemen,⁵³ O. Bock,¹⁰ M. Boer,⁵⁴ G. Bogaert,⁵⁴ A. Bohe,²⁹ F. Bondu,⁵⁵ R. Bonnand,⁸ B. A. Boom,¹¹ R. Bork,¹ V. Boschi,^{20,21} S. Bose,^{56,16} Y. Bouffanais,³⁰ A. Bozzi,³⁴ C. Bradaschia,²¹ P. R. Brady,¹⁸ V. B. Braginsky,^{49,†} M. Branchesi,^{57,58} J. E. Brau,⁵⁹ T. Briant,⁶⁰ A. Brillet,⁵⁴ M. Brinkmann,¹⁰ V. Brisson,²⁴ P. Brockill,¹⁸ J. E. Broida,⁶¹ A. F. Brooks,¹ D. A. Brown,³⁵ D. D. Brown,⁴⁵ N. M. Brown,¹² S. Brunett,¹ C. C. Buchanan,² A. Buikema,¹² T. Bulik,⁶² H. J. Bulten,^{63,11} A. Buonanno,^{29,64} D. Buskulic,⁸ C. Buy,³⁰ R. L. Byer,⁴⁰ M. Cabero,¹⁰ L. Cadonati,⁴⁴ G. Cagnoli,^{65,66} C. Cahillane,¹ J. Calderón Bustillo,⁴⁴ T. A. Callister,¹ E. Calloni,^{67,5} J. B. Camp,⁶⁸ W. Campbell,¹²⁰ M. Canepa,^{46,47} K. C. Cannon,⁶⁹ H. Cao,⁷⁰ J. Cao,⁷¹ C. D. Capano,¹⁰ E. Capocasa,³⁰ F. Carbognani,³⁴ S. Caride,⁷² J. Casanueva Diaz,²⁴ C. Casentini,^{26,15} S. Caudill,¹⁸ M. Cavaglià,⁷³ F. Cavalier,²⁴ R. Cavalieri,³⁴ G. Cella,²¹ C. B. Cepeda,¹ L. Cerboni Baiardi,^{57,58} G. Cerretani,^{20,21} E. Cesarini,^{26,15} S. J. Chamberlin,⁷⁴ M. Chan,³⁶ S. Chao,⁷⁵ P. Charlton,⁷⁶ E. Chassande-Mottin,³⁰ B. D. Cheeseboro,³¹ H. Y. Chen,⁷⁷ Y. Chen,⁵¹ H.-P. Cheng,⁶ A. Chincarini,⁴⁷ A. Chiummo,³⁴ T. Chmiel,⁷⁸ H. S. Cho,⁷⁹ M. Cho,⁶⁴ J. H. Chow,²² N. Christensen,⁶¹ Q. Chu,⁵² A. J. K. Chua,⁸⁰ S. Chua,⁶⁰ S. Chung,⁵² G. Ciani,⁶ F. Clara,³⁷ J. A. Clark,⁴⁴ F. Cleva,⁵⁴ C. Cocchieri,⁷³ E. Coccia,^{14,15} P.-F. Cohadon,⁶⁰ A. Colla,^{81,28} C. G. Collette,⁸² L. Cominsky,⁸³ M. Constancio Jr.,¹³ L. Conti,⁴² S. J. Cooper,⁴⁵ T. R. Corbitt,² N. Cornish,⁸⁴ A. Corsi,⁷² S. Cortese,³⁴ C. A. Costa,¹³ E. Coughlin,⁶¹ M. W. Coughlin,⁶¹ S. B. Coughlin,⁸⁵ J.-P. Coulon,⁵⁴ S. T. Countryman,³⁹ P. Couvares,¹ P. B. Covas,⁸⁶ E. E. Cowan,⁴⁴ D. M. Coward,⁵² M. J. Cowart,⁷ D. C. Coyne,¹ R. Coyne,⁷² J. D. E. Creighton,¹⁸ T. D. Creighton,⁸⁷ J. Cripe,² S. G. Crowder,⁸⁸ T. J. Cullen,²³ A. Cumming,³⁶ L. Cunningham,³⁶ E. Cuoco,³⁴ T. Dal Canton,⁶⁸ S. L. Danilishin,³⁶ S. D’Antonio,¹⁵ K. Danzmann,^{19,10} A. Dasgupta,⁸⁹ C. F. Da Silva Costa,⁶ V. Dattilo,³⁴ I. Dave,⁴⁸ M. Davier,²⁴ G. S. Davies,³⁶ D. Davis,³⁵ E. J. Daw,⁹⁰ B. Day,⁴⁴ R. Day,³⁴ S. De,³⁵ D. DeBra,⁴⁰ G. Debreczeni,³⁸

J. Degallaix,⁶⁵ M. De Laurentis,^{67,5} S. Deléglise,⁶⁰ W. Del Pozzo,⁴⁵ T. Denker,¹⁰ T. Dent,¹⁰ V. Dergachev,²⁹ R. De Rosa,^{67,5} R. T. DeRosa,⁷ R. DeSalvo,⁹¹ J. Devenson,⁵⁰ R. C. Devine,³¹ S. Dhurandhar,¹⁶ M. C. Díaz,⁸⁷ L. Di Fiore,⁵ M. Di Giovanni,^{92,93} T. Di Girolamo,^{67,5} A. Di Lieto,^{20,21} S. Di Pace,^{81,28} I. Di Palma,^{29,81,28} A. Di Virgilio,²¹ Z. Doctor,⁷⁷ V. Dolique,⁶⁵ F. Donovan,¹² K. L. Dooley,⁷³ S. Doravari,¹⁰ I. Dorrington,⁹⁴ R. Douglas,³⁶ M. Dovale Álvarez,⁴⁵ T. P. Downes,¹⁸ M. Drago,¹⁰ R. W. P. Drever,¹ J. C. Driggers,³⁷ Z. Du,⁷¹ M. Ducrot,⁸ S. E. Dwyer,³⁷ T. B. Edo,⁹⁰ M. C. Edwards,⁶¹ A. Effler,⁷ H.-B. Eggenstein,¹⁰ P. Ehrens,¹ J. Eichholz,¹ S. S. Eikenberry,⁶ R. C. Essick,¹² Z. Etienne,³¹ T. Etzel,¹ M. Evans,¹² T. M. Evans,⁷ R. Everett,⁷⁴ M. Factourovich,³⁹ V. Fafone,^{26,15,14} H. Fair,³⁵ S. Fairhurst,⁹⁴ X. Fan,⁷¹ S. Farinon,⁴⁷ B. Farr,⁷⁷ W. M. Farr,⁴⁵ E. J. Fauchon-Jones,⁹⁴ M. Favata,⁹⁵ M. Fays,⁹⁴ H. Fehrmann,¹⁰ M. M. Fejer,⁴⁰ A. Fernández Galiana,¹² I. Ferrante,^{20,21} E. C. Ferreira,¹³ F. Ferrini,³⁴ F. Fidecaro,^{20,21} I. Fiori,³⁴ D. Fiorucci,³⁰ R. P. Fisher,³⁵ R. Flaminio,^{65,96} M. Fletcher,³⁶ H. Fong,⁹⁷ S. S. Forsyth,⁴⁴ J.-D. Fournier,⁵⁴ S. Frasca,^{81,28} F. Frasconi,²¹ Z. Frei,⁹⁸ A. Freise,⁴⁵ R. Frey,⁵⁹ V. Frey,²⁴ E. M. Fries,¹ P. Fritschel,¹² V. V. Frolov,⁷ P. Fulda,^{6,68} M. Fyffe,⁷ H. Gabbard,¹⁰ B. U. Gadre,¹⁶ S. M. Gaebel,⁴⁵ J. R. Gair,⁹⁹ L. Gammaitoni,³² S. G. Gaonkar,¹⁶ F. Garufi,^{67,5} G. Gaur,¹⁰⁰ V. Gayathri,¹⁰¹ N. Gehrels,⁶⁸ G. Gemme,⁴⁷ E. Genin,³⁴ A. Gennai,²¹ J. George,⁴⁸ L. Gergely,¹⁰² V. Germain,⁸ S. Ghonge,¹⁷ Abhirup Ghosh,¹⁷ Archisman Ghosh,^{11,17} S. Ghosh,^{53,11} J. A. Giaime,^{2,7} K. D. Giardina,⁷ A. Giazotto,²¹ K. Gill,¹⁰³ A. Glaefke,³⁶ E. Goetz,¹⁰ R. Goetz,⁶ L. Gondan,⁹⁸ G. González,² J. M. Gonzalez Castro,^{20,21} A. Gopakumar,¹⁰⁴ M. L. Gorodetsky,⁴⁹ S. E. Gossan,¹ M. Gosselin,³⁴ R. Gouaty,⁸ A. Grado,^{105,5} C. Graef,³⁶ M. Granata,⁶⁵ A. Grant,³⁶ S. Gras,¹² C. Gray,³⁷ G. Greco,^{57,58} A. C. Green,⁴⁵ P. Groot,⁵³ H. Grote,¹⁰ S. Grunewald,²⁹ G. M. Guidi,^{57,58} X. Guo,⁷¹ A. Gupta,¹⁶ M. K. Gupta,⁸⁹ K. E. Gushwa,¹ E. K. Gustafson,¹ R. Gustafson,¹⁰⁶ J. J. Hacker,²³ B. R. Hall,⁵⁶ E. D. Hall,¹ G. Hammond,³⁶ M. Haney,¹⁰⁴ M. M. Hanke,¹⁰ J. Hanks,³⁷ C. Hanna,⁷⁴ M. D. Hannam,⁹⁴ J. Hanson,⁷ T. Hardwick,² J. Harms,^{57,58} G. M. Harry,³ I. W. Harry,²⁹ M. J. Hart,³⁶ M. T. Hartman,⁶ C.-J. Haster,^{45,97} K. Haughian,³⁶ J. Healy,¹⁰⁷ A. Heidmann,⁶⁰ M. C. Heintze,⁷ H. Heitmann,⁵⁴ P. Hello,²⁴ G. Hemming,³⁴ M. Hendry,³⁶ I. S. Heng,³⁶ J. Hennig,³⁶ J. Henry,¹⁰⁷ A. W. Heptonstall,¹ M. Heurs,^{10,19} S. Hild,³⁶ D. Hoak,³⁴ D. Hofman,⁶⁵ K. Holt,⁷ D. E. Holz,⁷⁷ P. Hopkins,⁹⁴ J. Hough,³⁶ E. A. Houston,³⁶ E. J. Howell,⁵² Y. M. Hu,¹⁰ E. A. Huerta,¹⁰⁸ D. Huet,²⁴ B. Hughey,¹⁰³ S. Husa,⁸⁶ S. H. Huttner,³⁶ T. Huynh-Dinh,⁷ N. Indik,¹⁰ D. R. Ingram,³⁷ R. Inta,⁷² H. N. Isa,³⁶ J.-M. Isac,⁶⁰ M. Isi,¹ T. Isogai,¹² B. R. Iyer,¹⁷ K. Izumi,³⁷ T. Jacqmin,⁶⁰ K. Jani,⁴⁴ P. Jaranowski,¹⁰⁹ S. Jawahar,¹¹⁰ F. Jiménez-Forteza,⁸⁶ W. W. Johnson,² D. I. Jones,¹¹¹ R. Jones,³⁶ R. J. G. Jonker,¹¹ L. Ju,⁵² J. Junker,¹⁰ C. V. Kalaghatgi,⁹⁴ V. Kalogera,⁸⁵ S. Kandhasamy,⁷³ G. Kang,⁷⁹ J. B. Kanner,¹ S. Karki,⁵⁹ K. S. Karvinen,¹⁰ M. Kasprzak,² E. Katsavounidis,¹² W. Katzman,⁷ S. Kaufer,¹⁹ T. Kaur,⁵² K. Kawabe,³⁷ F. Kéfélian,⁵⁴ D. Keitel,⁸⁶ D. B. Kelley,³⁵ R. Kennedy,⁹⁰ J. S. Key,¹¹² F. Y. Khalili,⁴⁹ I. Khan,¹⁴ S. Khan,⁹⁴ Z. Khan,⁸⁹ E. A. Khazanov,¹¹³ N. Kijbunchoo,³⁷ Chunglee Kim,¹¹⁴ J. C. Kim,¹¹⁵ Whansun Kim,¹¹⁶ W. Kim,⁷⁰ Y.-M. Kim,^{117,114} S. J. Kimbrell,⁴⁴ E. J. King,⁷⁰ P. J. King,³⁷ R. Kirchhoff,¹⁰ J. S. Kissel,³⁷ B. Klein,⁸⁵ L. Kleybolte,²⁷ S. Klimenko,⁶ P. Koch,¹⁰ S. M. Koehlenbeck,¹⁰ S. Koley,¹¹ V. Kondrashov,¹ A. Kontos,¹² M. Korobko,²⁷ W. Z. Korth,¹ I. Kowalska,⁶² D. B. Kozak,¹ C. Krämer,¹⁰ V. Kringel,¹⁰ A. Królak,^{118,119} G. Kuehn,¹⁰ P. Kumar,⁹⁷ R. Kumar,⁸⁹ L. Kuo,⁷⁵ A. Kutynia,¹¹⁸ B. D. Lackey,^{29,35} M. Landry,³⁷ R. N. Lang,¹⁸ J. Lange,¹⁰⁷ B. Lantz,⁴⁰ R. K. Lanza,¹² A. Lartaux-Vollard,²⁴ P. D. Lasky,¹²⁰ M. Laxen,⁷ A. Lazzarini,¹ C. Lazzaro,⁴² P. Leaci,^{81,28} S. Leavey,³⁶ E. O. Lebigot,³⁰ C. H. Lee,¹¹⁷ H. K. Lee,¹²¹ H. M. Lee,¹¹⁴ K. Lee,³⁶ J. Lehmann,¹⁰ A. Lenon,³¹ M. Leonardi,^{92,93} J. R. Leong,¹⁰ N. Leroy,²⁴ N. Letendre,⁸ Y. Levin,¹²⁰ T. G. F. Li,¹²² A. Libson,¹² T. B. Littenberg,¹²³ J. Liu,⁵² N. A. Lockerbie,¹¹⁰ A. L. Lombardi,⁴⁴ L. T. London,⁹⁴ J. E. Lord,³⁵ M. Lorenzini,^{14,15} V. Loriette,¹²⁴ M. Lormand,⁷ G. Losurdo,²¹ J. D. Lough,^{10,19} G. Lovelace,²³ H. Lück,^{19,10} A. P. Lundgren,¹⁰ R. Lynch,¹² Y. Ma,⁵¹ S. Macfoy,⁵⁰ B. Machenschalk,¹⁰ M. MacInnis,¹² D. M. Macleod,² F. Magaña-Sandoval,³⁵ E. Majorana,²⁸ I. Maksimovic,¹²⁴ V. Malvezzi,^{26,15} N. Man,⁵⁴ V. Mandic,¹²⁵ V. Mangano,³⁶ G. L. Mansell,²² M. Manske,¹⁸ M. Mantovani,³⁴ F. Marchesoni,^{126,33} F. Marion,⁸ S. Márka,³⁹ Z. Márka,³⁹ A. S. Markosyan,⁴⁰ E. Maros,¹ F. Martelli,^{57,58} L. Martellini,⁵⁴ I. W. Martin,³⁶ D. V. Martynov,¹² K. Mason,¹² A. Masserot,⁸ T. J. Massinger,¹ M. Masso-Reid,³⁶ S. Mastrogiorganni,^{81,28} A. Matas,¹²⁵ F. Matichard,^{12,1} L. Matone,³⁹ N. Mavalvala,¹² N. Mazumder,⁵⁶ R. McCarthy,³⁷ D. E. McClelland,²² S. McCormick,⁷ C. McGrath,¹⁸ S. C. McGuire,¹²⁷ G. McIntyre,¹ J. McIver,¹ D. J. McManus,²² T. McRae,²² S. T. McWilliams,³¹ D. Meacher,^{54,74} G. D. Meadors,^{29,10} J. Meidam,¹¹ A. Melatos,¹²⁸ G. Mendell,³⁷ D. Mendoza-Gandara,¹⁰ R. A. Mercer,¹⁸ E. L. Merilh,³⁷ M. Merzougui,⁵⁴ S. Meshkov,¹ C. Messenger,³⁶ C. Messick,⁷⁴ R. Metzdrorff,⁶⁰ P. M. Meyers,¹²⁵ F. Mezzani,^{28,81} H. Miao,⁴⁵ C. Michel,⁶⁵ H. Middleton,⁴⁵ E. E. Mikhailov,¹²⁹ L. Milano,^{67,5} A. L. Miller,^{6,81,28} A. Miller,⁸⁵ B. B. Miller,⁸⁵ J. Miller,¹² M. Millhouse,⁸⁴ Y. Minenkov,¹⁵ J. Ming,²⁹ S. Mirshekari,¹³⁰ C. Mishra,¹⁷ S. Mitra,¹⁶ V. P. Mitrofanov,⁴⁹ G. Mitselmakher,⁶ R. Mittleman,¹² A. Moggi,²¹ M. Mohan,³⁴ S. R. P. Mohapatra,¹² M. Montani,^{57,58} B. C. Moore,⁹⁵ C. J. Moore,⁸⁰ D. Moraru,³⁷ G. Moreno,³⁷ S. R. Morris,⁸⁷ B. Mours,⁸

C. M. Mow-Lowry,⁴⁵ G. Mueller,⁶ A. W. Muir,⁹⁴ Arunava Mukherjee,¹⁷ D. Mukherjee,¹⁸ S. Mukherjee,⁸⁷ N. Mukund,¹⁶ A. Mullavey,⁷ J. Munch,⁷⁰ E. A. M. Muniz,²³ P. G. Murray,³⁶ A. Mytidis,⁶ K. Napier,⁴⁴ I. Nardecchia,^{26,15} L. Naticchioni,^{81,28} G. Nelemans,^{53,11} T. J. N. Nelson,⁷ M. Neri,^{46,47} M. Nery,¹⁰ A. Neunzert,¹⁰⁶ J. M. Newport,³ G. Newton,³⁶ T. T. Nguyen,²² A. B. Nielsen,¹⁰ S. Nissanke,^{53,11} A. Nitz,¹⁰ A. Noack,¹⁰ F. Nocera,³⁴ D. Nolting,⁷ M. E. N. Normandin,⁸⁷ L. K. Nuttall,³⁵ J. Oberling,³⁷ E. Ochsner,¹⁸ E. Oelker,¹² G. H. Ogin,¹³¹ J. J. Oh,¹¹⁶ S. H. Oh,¹¹⁶ F. Ohme,^{94,10} M. Oliver,⁸⁶ P. Oppermann,¹⁰ Richard J. Oram,⁷ B. O'Reilly,⁷ R. O'Shaughnessy,¹⁰⁷ D. J. Ottaway,⁷⁰ H. Overmier,⁷ B. J. Owen,⁷² A. E. Pace,⁷⁴ J. Page,¹²³ A. Pai,¹⁰¹ S. A. Pai,⁴⁸ J. R. Palamos,⁵⁹ O. Palashov,¹¹³ C. Palomba,²⁸ A. Pal-Singh,²⁷ H. Pan,⁷⁵ C. Pankow,⁸⁵ F. Pannarale,⁹⁴ B. C. Pant,⁴⁸ F. Paoletti,^{34,21} A. Paoli,³⁴ M. A. Papa,^{29,18,10} H. R. Paris,⁴⁰ W. Parker,⁷ D. Pascucci,³⁶ A. Pasqualetti,³⁴ R. Passaquieti,^{20,21} D. Passuello,²¹ B. Patricelli,^{20,21} B. L. Pearlstone,³⁶ M. Pedraza,¹ R. Pedurand,^{65,132} L. Pekowsky,³⁵ A. Pele,⁷ S. Penn,¹³³ C. J. Perez,³⁷ A. Perreca,¹ L. M. Perri,⁸⁵ H. P. Pfeiffer,⁹⁷ M. Phelps,³⁶ O. J. Piccinni,^{81,28} M. Pichot,⁵⁴ F. Piergiovanni,^{57,58} V. Pierro,⁹ G. Pillant,³⁴ L. Pinard,⁶⁵ I. M. Pinto,⁹ M. Pitkin,³⁶ M. Poe,¹⁸ R. Poggiani,^{20,21} P. Popolizio,³⁴ A. Post,¹⁰ J. Powell,³⁶ J. Prasad,¹⁶ J. W. W. Pratt,¹⁰³ V. Predoi,⁹⁴ T. Prestegard,^{125,18} M. Prijatelj,^{10,34} M. Principe,⁹ S. Privitera,²⁹ G. A. Prodi,^{92,93} L. G. Prokhorov,⁴⁹ O. Puncken,¹⁰ M. Punturo,³³ P. Puppo,²⁸ M. Pürer,²⁹ H. Qi,¹⁸ J. Qin,⁵² S. Qiu,¹²⁰ V. Quetschke,⁸⁷ E. A. Quintero,¹ R. Quitzow-James,⁵⁹ F. J. Raab,³⁷ D. S. Rabeling,²² H. Radkins,³⁷ P. Raffai,⁹⁸ S. Raja,⁴⁸ C. Rajan,⁴⁸ M. Rakhmanov,⁸⁷ P. Rapagnani,^{81,28} V. Raymond,²⁹ M. Razzano,^{20,21} V. Re,²⁶ J. Read,²³ T. Regimbau,⁵⁴ L. Rei,⁴⁷ S. Reid,⁹⁰ D. H. Reitze,^{1,6} H. Rew,¹²⁹ S. D. Reyes,³⁵ E. Rhoades,¹⁰³ F. Ricci,^{81,28} K. Riles,¹⁰⁶ M. Rizzo,¹⁰⁷ N. A. Robertson,^{1,36} R. Robie,³⁶ F. Robinet,²⁴ A. Rocchi,¹⁵ L. Rolland,⁸ J. G. Rollins,¹ V. J. Roma,⁵⁹ J. D. Romano,⁸⁷ R. Romano,^{4,5} J. H. Romie,⁷ D. Rosińska,^{134,43} S. Rowan,³⁶ A. Rüdiger,¹⁰ P. Ruggi,³⁴ K. Ryan,³⁷ S. Sachdev,¹ T. Sadecki,³⁷ L. Sadeghian,¹⁸ M. Sakellariadou,¹³⁵ L. Salconi,³⁴ M. Saleem,¹⁰¹ F. Salemi,¹⁰ A. Samajdar,¹³⁶ L. Sammut,¹²⁰ L. M. Sampson,⁸⁵ E. J. Sanchez,¹ V. Sandberg,³⁷ J. R. Sanders,³⁵ B. Sassolas,⁶⁵ B. S. Sathyaprakash,^{74,94} P. R. Saulson,³⁵ O. Sauter,¹⁰⁶ R. L. Savage,³⁷ A. Sawadsky,¹⁹ P. Schale,⁵⁹ J. Scheuer,⁸⁵ S. Schlassa,⁶¹ E. Schmidt,¹⁰³ J. Schmidt,¹⁰ P. Schmidt,^{1,51} R. Schnabel,²⁷ R. M. S. Schofield,⁵⁹ A. Schönbeck,²⁷ E. Schreiber,¹⁰ D. Schuette,^{10,19} B. F. Schutz,^{94,29} S. G. Schwalbe,¹⁰³ J. Scott,³⁶ S. M. Scott,²² D. Sellers,⁷ A. S. Sengupta,¹³⁷ D. Sentenac,³⁴ V. Sequino,^{26,15} A. Sergeev,¹¹³ Y. Setyawati,^{53,11} D. A. Shaddock,²² T. J. Shaffer,³⁷ M. S. Shahriar,⁸⁵ B. Shapiro,⁴⁰ P. Shawhan,⁶⁴ A. Sheperd,¹⁸ D. H. Shoemaker,¹² D. M. Shoemaker,⁴⁴ K. Siellez,⁴⁴ X. Siemens,¹⁸ M. Sieniawska,⁴³ D. Sigg,³⁷ A. D. Silva,¹³ A. Singer,¹ L. P. Singer,⁶⁸ A. Singh,^{29,10,19} R. Singh,² A. Singhal,¹⁴ A. M. Sintes,⁸⁶ B. J. J. Slagmolen,²² B. Smith,⁷ J. R. Smith,²³ R. J. E. Smith,¹ E. J. Son,¹¹⁶ B. Sorazu,³⁶ F. Sorrentino,⁴⁷ T. Souradeep,¹⁶ A. P. Spencer,³⁶ A. K. Srivastava,⁸⁹ A. Staley,³⁹ M. Steinke,¹⁰ J. Steinlechner,³⁶ S. Steinlechner,^{27,36} D. Steinmeyer,^{10,19} B. C. Stephens,¹⁸ S. P. Stevenson,⁴⁵ R. Stone,⁸⁷ K. A. Strain,³⁶ N. Straniero,⁶⁵ G. Stratta,^{57,58} S. E. Strigin,⁴⁹ R. Sturani,¹³⁰ A. L. Stuver,⁷ T. Z. Summerscales,¹³⁸ L. Sun,¹²⁸ S. Sunil,⁸⁹ P. J. Sutton,⁹⁴ B. L. Swinkels,³⁴ M. J. Szczepańczyk,¹⁰³ M. Tacca,³⁰ D. Talukder,⁵⁹ D. B. Tanner,⁶ D. Tao,⁶¹ M. Tápai,¹⁰² A. Taracchini,²⁹ R. Taylor,¹ T. Theeg,¹⁰ E. G. Thomas,⁴⁵ M. Thomas,⁷ P. Thomas,³⁷ K. A. Thorne,⁷ E. Thrane,¹²⁰ T. Tippens,⁴⁴ S. Tiwari,^{14,93} V. Tiwari,⁹⁴ K. V. Tokmakov,¹¹⁰ K. Toland,³⁶ C. Tomlinson,⁹⁰ M. Tonelli,^{20,21} Z. Tornasi,³⁶ C. I. Torrie,¹ D. Töyrä,⁴⁵ F. Travasso,^{32,33} G. Traylor,⁷ D. Trifirò,⁷³ J. Trinastic,⁶ M. C. Tringali,^{92,93} L. Trozzo,^{139,21} M. Tse,¹² R. Tso,¹ M. Turconi,⁵⁴ D. Tuyenbayev,⁸⁷ D. Ugolini,¹⁴⁰ C. S. Unnikrishnan,¹⁰⁴ A. L. Urban,¹ S. A. Usman,⁹⁴ H. Vahlbruch,¹⁹ G. Vajente,¹ G. Valdes,⁸⁷ N. van Bakel,¹¹ M. van Beuzekom,¹¹ J. F. J. van den Brand,^{63,11} C. Van Den Broeck,¹¹ D. C. Vander-Hyde,³⁵ L. van der Schaaf,¹¹ J. V. van Heijningen,¹¹ A. A. van Veggel,³⁶ M. Vardaro,^{41,42} V. Varma,⁵¹ S. Vass,¹ M. Vasúth,³⁸ A. Vecchio,⁴⁵ G. Vedovato,⁴² J. Veitch,⁴⁵ P. J. Veitch,⁷⁰ K. Venkateswara,¹⁴¹ G. Venugopalan,¹ D. Verkindt,⁸ F. Vetrano,^{57,58} A. Viceré,^{57,58} A. D. Viets,¹⁸ S. Vinciguerra,⁴⁵ D. J. Vine,⁵⁰ J.-Y. Vinet,⁵⁴ S. Vitale,¹² T. Vo,³⁵ H. Vocca,^{32,33} C. Vorvick,³⁷ D. V. Voss,⁶ W. D. Vousden,⁴⁵ S. P. Vyatchanin,⁴⁹ A. R. Wade,¹ L. E. Wade,⁷⁸ M. Wade,⁷⁸ M. Walker,² L. Wallace,¹ S. Walsh,^{29,10} G. Wang,^{14,58} H. Wang,⁴⁵ M. Wang,⁴⁵ Y. Wang,⁵² R. L. Ward,²² J. Warner,³⁷ M. Was,⁸ J. Watchi,⁸² B. Weaver,³⁷ L.-W. Wei,⁵⁴ M. Weinert,¹⁰ A. J. Weinstein,¹ R. Weiss,¹² L. Wen,⁵² P. Weßels,¹⁰ T. Westphal,¹⁰ K. Wette,¹⁰ J. T. Whelan,¹⁰⁷ B. F. Whiting,¹²⁰ C. Whittle,¹²⁰ D. Williams,³⁶ R. D. Williams,¹ A. R. Williamson,⁹⁴ J. L. Willis,¹⁴² B. Willke,^{19,10} M. H. Wimmer,^{10,19} W. Winkler,¹⁰ C. C. Wipf,¹ H. Wittel,^{10,19} G. Woan,³⁶ J. Woehler,¹⁰ J. Worden,³⁷ J. L. Wright,³⁶ D. S. Wu,¹⁰ G. Wu,⁷ W. Yam,¹² H. Yamamoto,¹ C. C. Yancey,⁶⁴ M. J. Yap,²² Hang Yu,¹² Haocun Yu,¹² M. Yvert,⁸ A. Zadrożny,¹¹⁸ L. Zangrando,⁴² M. Zanolin,¹⁰³ J.-P. Zendri,⁴² M. Zevin,⁸⁵ L. Zhang,¹ M. Zhang,¹²⁹ T. Zhang,³⁶ Y. Zhang,¹⁰⁷ C. Zhao,⁵² M. Zhou,⁸⁵ Z. Zhou,⁸⁵ S. J. Zhu,^{29,10} X. J. Zhu,⁵² M. E. Zucker,^{1,12} and J. Zweigig¹

(LIGO Scientific Collaboration and Virgo Collaboration)

- ¹*LIGO, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, California 91125, USA*
- ²*Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70803, USA*
- ³*American University, Washington, D.C. 20016, USA*
- ⁴*Università di Salerno, Fisciano, I-84084 Salerno, Italy*
- ⁵*INFN, Sezione di Napoli, Complesso Universitario di Monte S. Angelo, I-80126 Napoli, Italy*
- ⁶*University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida 32611, USA*
- ⁷*LIGO Livingston Observatory, Livingston, Louisiana 70754, USA*
- ⁸*Laboratoire d'Annecy-le-Vieux de Physique des Particules (LAPP), Université Savoie Mont Blanc, CNRS/IN2P3, F-74941 Annecy-le-Vieux, France*
- ⁹*University of Sannio at Benevento, I-82100 Benevento, Italy and INFN, Sezione di Napoli, I-80100 Napoli, Italy*
- ¹⁰*Albert-Einstein-Institut, Max-Planck-Institut für Gravitationsphysik, D-30167 Hannover, Germany*
- ¹¹*Nikhef, Science Park, 1098 XG Amsterdam, The Netherlands*
- ¹²*LIGO, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139, USA*
- ¹³*Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais, 12227-010 São José dos Campos, São Paulo, Brazil*
- ¹⁴*INFN, Gran Sasso Science Institute, I-67100 L'Aquila, Italy*
- ¹⁵*INFN, Sezione di Roma Tor Vergata, I-00133 Roma, Italy*
- ¹⁶*Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics, Pune 411007, India*
- ¹⁷*International Centre for Theoretical Sciences, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Bengaluru 560089, India*
- ¹⁸*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201, USA*
- ¹⁹*Leibniz Universität Hannover, D-30167 Hannover, Germany*
- ²⁰*Università di Pisa, I-56127 Pisa, Italy*
- ²¹*INFN, Sezione di Pisa, I-56127 Pisa, Italy*
- ²²*Australian National University, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory 0200, Australia*
- ²³*California State University Fullerton, Fullerton, California 92831, USA*
- ²⁴*LAL, Univ. Paris-Sud, CNRS/IN2P3, Université Paris-Saclay, F-91898 Orsay, France*
- ²⁵*Chennai Mathematical Institute, Chennai 603103, India*
- ²⁶*Università di Roma Tor Vergata, I-00133 Roma, Italy*
- ²⁷*Universität Hamburg, D-22761 Hamburg, Germany*
- ²⁸*INFN, Sezione di Roma, I-00185 Roma, Italy*
- ²⁹*Albert-Einstein-Institut, Max-Planck-Institut für Gravitationsphysik, D-14476 Potsdam-Golm, Germany*
- ³⁰*APC, AstroParticule et Cosmologie, Université Paris Diderot, CNRS/IN2P3, CEA/Irfu, Observatoire de Paris, Sorbonne Paris Cité, F-75205 Paris Cedex 13, France*
- ³¹*West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia 26506, USA*
- ³²*Università di Perugia, I-06123 Perugia, Italy*
- ³³*INFN, Sezione di Perugia, I-06123 Perugia, Italy*
- ³⁴*European Gravitational Observatory (EGO), I-56021 Cascina, Pisa, Italy*
- ³⁵*Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York 13244, USA*
- ³⁶*SUPA, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, United Kingdom*
- ³⁷*LIGO Hanford Observatory, Richland, Washington 99352, USA*
- ³⁸*Wigner RCP, RMKI, H-1121 Budapest, Konkoly Thege Miklós út 29-33, Hungary*
- ³⁹*Columbia University, New York, New York 10027, USA*
- ⁴⁰*Stanford University, Stanford, California 94305, USA*
- ⁴¹*Università di Padova, Dipartimento di Fisica e Astronomia, I-35131 Padova, Italy*
- ⁴²*INFN, Sezione di Padova, I-35131 Padova, Italy*
- ⁴³*Nicolaus Copernicus Astronomical Center, Polish Academy of Sciences, 00-716, Warsaw, Poland*
- ⁴⁴*Center for Relativistic Astrophysics and School of Physics, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, Georgia 30332, USA*
- ⁴⁵*University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, United Kingdom*
- ⁴⁶*Università degli Studi di Genova, I-16146 Genova, Italy*
- ⁴⁷*INFN, Sezione di Genova, I-16146 Genova, Italy*
- ⁴⁸*RRCAT, Indore MP 452013, India*
- ⁴⁹*Faculty of Physics, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow 119991, Russia*
- ⁵⁰*SUPA, University of the West of Scotland, Paisley PA1 2BE, United Kingdom*
- ⁵¹*Caltech CaRT, Pasadena, California 91125, USA*
- ⁵²*University of Western Australia, Crawley, Western Australia 6009, Australia*
- ⁵³*Department of Astrophysics/IMAPP, Radboud University Nijmegen, P.O. Box 9010, 6500 GL Nijmegen, The Netherlands*
- ⁵⁴*Artemis, Université Côte d'Azur, CNRS, Observatoire Côte d'Azur, CS 34229, F-06304 Nice Cedex 4, France*
- ⁵⁵*Institut de Physique de Rennes, CNRS, Université de Rennes 1, F-35042 Rennes, France*
- ⁵⁶*Washington State University, Pullman, Washington 99164, USA*
- ⁵⁷*Università degli Studi di Urbino 'Carlo Bo', I-61029 Urbino, Italy*

- ⁵⁸*INFN, Sezione di Firenze, I-50019 Sesto Fiorentino, Firenze, Italy*
- ⁵⁹*University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403, USA*
- ⁶⁰*Laboratoire Kastler Brossel, UPMC-Sorbonne Universités, CNRS, ENS-PSL Research University, Collège de France, F-75005 Paris, France*
- ⁶¹*Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota 55057, USA*
- ⁶²*Astronomical Observatory Warsaw University, 00-478 Warsaw, Poland*
- ⁶³*VU University Amsterdam, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands*
- ⁶⁴*University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742, USA*
- ⁶⁵*Laboratoire des Matériaux Avancés (LMA), CNRS/IN2P3, F-69622 Villeurbanne, France*
- ⁶⁶*Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1, F-69622 Villeurbanne, France*
- ⁶⁷*Università di Napoli 'Federico II', Complesso Universitario di Monte S. Angelo, I-80126 Napoli, Italy*
- ⁶⁸*NASA/Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, Maryland 20771, USA*
- ⁶⁹*RESCEU, University of Tokyo, Tokyo 113-0033, Japan*
- ⁷⁰*University of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia 5005, Australia*
- ⁷¹*Tsinghua University, Beijing 100084, China*
- ⁷²*Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas 79409, USA*
- ⁷³*The University of Mississippi, University, Mississippi 38677, USA*
- ⁷⁴*The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania 16802, USA*
- ⁷⁵*National Tsing Hua University, Hsinchu City, 30013 Taiwan, Republic of China*
- ⁷⁶*Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, New South Wales 2678, Australia*
- ⁷⁷*University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois 60637, USA*
- ⁷⁸*Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio 43022, USA*
- ⁷⁹*Korea Institute of Science and Technology Information, Daejeon 305-806, Korea*
- ⁸⁰*University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB2 1TN, United Kingdom*
- ⁸¹*Università di Roma 'La Sapienza', I-00185 Roma, Italy*
- ⁸²*University of Brussels, Brussels 1050, Belgium*
- ⁸³*Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, California 94928, USA*
- ⁸⁴*Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana 59717, USA*
- ⁸⁵*Center for Interdisciplinary Exploration & Research in Astrophysics (CIERA), Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60208, USA*
- ⁸⁶*Universitat de les Illes Balears, IAC3—IEEC, E-07122 Palma de Mallorca, Spain*
- ⁸⁷*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Brownsville, Texas 78520, USA*
- ⁸⁸*Bellevue College, Bellevue, Washington 98007, USA*
- ⁸⁹*Institute for Plasma Research, Bhat, Gandhinagar 382428, India*
- ⁹⁰*The University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, United Kingdom*
- ⁹¹*California State University, Los Angeles, 5154 State University Dr, Los Angeles, California 90032, USA*
- ⁹²*Università di Trento, Dipartimento di Fisica, I-38123 Povo, Trento, Italy*
- ⁹³*INFN, Trento Institute for Fundamental Physics and Applications, I-38123 Povo, Trento, Italy*
- ⁹⁴*Cardiff University, Cardiff CF24 3AA, United Kingdom*
- ⁹⁵*Montclair State University, Montclair, New Jersey 07043, USA*
- ⁹⁶*National Astronomical Observatory of Japan, 2-21-1 Osawa, Mitaka, Tokyo 181-8588, Japan*
- ⁹⁷*Canadian Institute for Theoretical Astrophysics, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H8, Canada*
- ⁹⁸*MTA Eötvös University, "Lendület" Astrophysics Research Group, Budapest 1117, Hungary*
- ⁹⁹*School of Mathematics, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH9 3FD, United Kingdom*
- ¹⁰⁰*University and Institute of Advanced Research, Gandhinagar, Gujarat 382007, India*
- ¹⁰¹*IISER-TVM, CET Campus, Trivandrum Kerala 695016, India*
- ¹⁰²*University of Szeged, Dóm tér 9, Szeged 6720, Hungary*
- ¹⁰³*Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Prescott, Arizona 86301, USA*
- ¹⁰⁴*Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Mumbai 400005, India*
- ¹⁰⁵*INAF, Osservatorio Astronomico di Capodimonte, I-80131 Napoli, Italy*
- ¹⁰⁶*University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109, USA*
- ¹⁰⁷*Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York 14623, USA*
- ¹⁰⁸*NCSA, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, Illinois 61801, USA*
- ¹⁰⁹*University of Białystok, 15-424 Białystok, Poland*
- ¹¹⁰*SUPA, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow G1 1XQ, United Kingdom*
- ¹¹¹*University of Southampton, Southampton SO17 1BJ, United Kingdom*
- ¹¹²*University of Washington Bothell, 18115 Campus Way NE, Bothell, Washington 98011, USA*
- ¹¹³*Institute of Applied Physics, Nizhny Novgorod, 603950, Russia*
- ¹¹⁴*Seoul National University, Seoul 151-742, Korea*
- ¹¹⁵*Inje University Gimhae, 621-749 South Gyeongsang, Korea*

- ¹¹⁶*National Institute for Mathematical Sciences, Daejeon 305-390, Korea*
¹¹⁷*Pusan National University, Busan 609-735, Korea*
¹¹⁸*NCBJ, 05-400 Świerk-Otwock, Poland*
¹¹⁹*Institute of Mathematics, Polish Academy of Sciences, 00656 Warsaw, Poland*
¹²⁰*The School of Physics & Astronomy, Monash University, Clayton 3800, Victoria, Australia*
¹²¹*Hanyang University, Seoul 133-791, Korea*
¹²²*The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, NT, Hong Kong*
¹²³*University of Alabama in Huntsville, Huntsville, Alabama 35899, USA*
¹²⁴*ESPCI, CNRS, F-75005 Paris, France*
¹²⁵*University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455, USA*
¹²⁶*Università di Camerino, Dipartimento di Fisica, I-62032 Camerino, Italy*
¹²⁷*Southern University and A&M College, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70813, USA*
¹²⁸*The University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria 3010, Australia*
¹²⁹*College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia 23187, USA*
¹³⁰*Instituto de Física Teórica, University Estadual Paulista/ICTP South American Institute for Fundamental Research, São Paulo SP 01140-070, Brazil*
¹³¹*Whitman College, 345 Boyer Avenue, Walla Walla, Washington 99362 USA*
¹³²*Université de Lyon, F-69361 Lyon, France*
¹³³*Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, New York 14456, USA*
¹³⁴*Janusz Gil Institute of Astronomy, University of Zielona Góra, 65-265 Zielona Góra, Poland*
¹³⁵*King's College London, University of London, London WC2R 2LS, United Kingdom*
¹³⁶*IISER-Kolkata, Mohanpur, West Bengal 741252, India*
¹³⁷*Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar Ahmedabad Gujarat 382424, India*
¹³⁸*Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan 49104, USA*
¹³⁹*Università di Siena, I-53100 Siena, Italy*
¹⁴⁰*Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas 78212, USA*
¹⁴¹*University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98195, USA*
¹⁴²*Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas 79699, USA*

[†]Deceased, March 2016.